

Rising up

This year hundreds of thousands of children around the world have gone on 'strike' over the future of the planet as the issue becomes increasingly critical. Should young children be getting involved? By **Amy Fallon**

In February, a nursery in Liverpool adopted a rhino. 'Lankeu' is a soft toy that is used to teach the 106 children in the class about the effects of climate change. Children in the Honey Pot Day nursery take turns taking the endangered animal home, taking photos and recording a diary of how they are playing with it over the weekend.

'We decided it was important for us to be able to educate our children about the impacts that we're having on the environment and what it's doing,' says Ashley Williams-Day, Honey Pot quality and training manager. 'We needed to do more than just have a recycling bin. (The children) have been able to develop an understanding of the effects of a number of issues including climate change,' says Ms Williams-Day.

'They are able to talk more widely about issues affecting our planet and are developing a sense of responsibility for its future.'

The facts on climate change are now irrefutable. Last year, a UN report concluded that to keep the rise in global temperatures below 1.5°C this century, seen as crucial to prevent unstoppable warming, emissions of carbon dioxide would have to be cut by 45 per cent by 2030. There is a growing consensus that the next 18 months will be critical in terms of getting political leaders to commit to steps enabling this radical change to happen.

It is predicted that climate change, if unmitigated, will bring starvation, destruction, mass migration, disease and war as people are forced to flee their homes to escape rising sea levels, intolerable heat, or find resources. How should this aspect be tackled with young children, if at all?

According to John Siraj-Blatchford, honorary Professor at the University of Plymouth Institute



of Education, climate change can and should be addressed in the early years, but in a way that ensures young children feel positive about the future of their planet.

'We know from psychology that if we present dystopian ideas of future disasters, people become frightened and will retreat into secure areas of their lives, rather than address it,' says Prof Siraj-Blatchford. 'For example, we do not want to show children images of turtles being strangled by plastics. Instead, we need to educate children about reducing the amount of plastic in society.'

According to a 2008 paper, The Contribution of Early Childhood Education to a Sustainable Society from UNESCO, climate change is at the heart of the idea of sustainability, and 'education is humanity's best hope and most effective means in the quest to achieve sustainable development.'

An Extinction Rebellion protest in Glasgow in July

Its first two recommendations were to increase investment in early childhood education as a means of ensuring 'sustainable societies', and to 'incorporate education for sustainable development in the early years without delay. Early childhood is a highly appropriate period in children's development in which to introduce basic concepts.'

At Young Friends Nursery and Nature School in Hove, there is a focus on what children can do, not what would happen in the worst-case scenarios.

'We would have some serious parental complaints on our hands if we were to tell early years children things that would keep them awake at night,' says owner Louise Lloyd-Evans. 'We thread some dangers, of course, with issues they can relate to, but they are mild.'

Educating children about climate change and the environment has also been shown to help their

case study



Karen James, a member of Extinction Rebellion Families

'My son was three weeks old on the first day of the "international rebellion" in April and spent the day hanging out in the families area in Marble Arch. My daughter, who is two in late September, has been attending Extinction Rebellion protests since she was 16 months old.

'At 18 months I caught her marching around our living room singing "power to the people". She regularly tells people to "save our bees". She learnt about the importance of bees during our Beehive Baby action, when we marched to Buckingham Palace to deliver a letter to the Queen, asking her to rehabilitate bees on all of her land in the UK.

'I've never been involved in activism

before, or been particularly aware of environmental issues, but woke up to the dire situation we are in last winter, while pregnant with my son, after a friend posted something about it on social media. Facing this truth has been very painful, but taking action with like-minded families has given me hope. I feel it is important to involve my children in this as it is their future we are fighting for and I want them to know they can have a voice in this.

'I have been amazed by how much my toddler is learning and how much she enjoys attending XR events. I see



her march around with such confidence during our actions and feel that being part of this movement, and watching us all – especially young school strikers – stand up and fight to protect the world we love is having a positive impact on her.'

parents to become more environmentally conscious. Researchers at North Carolina State University tested how ten- to 14-year-olds' exposure to climate change coursework might affect their parents' views. According to a report on their paper published in May this year in *Scientific American*, 'Fathers and conservative parents showed the biggest change in attitudes, and daughters were more effective than sons in shifting their parents' views. The results suggest that conversations between generations may be an effective starting point in combating the effects of a warming environment.'

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the current most prominent global climate change activist is a child. Greta Thunberg, 16, started the school 'strike' movement, which grew into 1.4 million pupils around the world 'striking' on 15 March. The action was instigated after Ms Thunberg learned about climate change at school and decided to act, in turn inspiring many others to do the same.

Ahead of a crucial climate conference this month, and a global day of action planned for 20 September, some nursery-age children have been preparing to 'strike' in solidarity.

'Childbase will be encouraging more mini-protests in the coming months to raise the profile of this important issue,' says health, safety and environment director Mark Bird, after children at its Meadow

View Day Nursery in Newport Pagnell joined the protests in February. 'Parents have applauded our stance and readily extend environmental activities in the home and on holiday.

'Joining the worldwide Schools Strike for Climate was seen as an extension of nursery activities, giving children the opportunity to express what they have learned and how they feel, while visibly reminding the community that action is needed to preserve their future.'

Movements such as Extinction Rebellion are increasingly recognising the role of young children, with Extinction Rebellion Families (XR Families) created earlier this year to make the

Delivering a letter to MPs on behalf of 'We all rise together'



activism space appropriate for children. They are joining the movement's demands for governments to address the climate crisis, calling for non-violent civil disobedience. Many participants include children under the age of five, says the group, with parents commonly taking their children to school strikes and XR 'actions'.

'On the issue of climate activism, we believe the best way to teach is through example, joining in on actions the parent feels are appropriate for their children,' says Juliana Muniz Westcott, XR Families co-ordinator. She is also the author of *Our Fight: Extinction Rebellion*, a children's book born out of the desire to explain more to her then three-year-old after the toddler attended her first protest in London last year.

'To be honest, a lot of the time being an activist means playing in central London and sometimes talking about some issues, but we do not overload them nor use actions as a way of indoctrinating children,' says Ms Westcott.

Ultimately, children have not just a moral but a legal right to be involved in any decision that affects them, Professor Siraj-Blatchford adds, citing the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As Anthony Lake, UNICEF executive director said in 2015, 'As more extreme weather events expand the number of emergencies and humanitarian crises, children will pay the highest price.'

climate change – the facts

- Climate change is the process of our planet heating up and means more extreme and unpredictable weather.
- Human-induced warming reached approximately 1°C above pre-industrial levels in 2017.
- There is a consensus that limiting overall global average warming to 1.5°C is needed to avoid 'runaway climate change', which would be impossible to stop.
- Higher temperatures mean higher sea levels as polar ice melts; more CO₂ in the atmosphere leads to acidification of the oceans, disrupting the ecosystem and affecting our food supply.
- We are also facing biodiversity loss at unprecedented rates, with up to one million species threatened with extinction, more than at any other time in human history.